Colin Campbell

Questioning

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On May 3 in Los Angeles, 33-year-old Vaughn Orrin Greenwood is scheduled to go on trial for 11 murders, the nine Skid Row slasher killings of the winter of 1974-75 plus two similar killings dating back to 1964. The case is noteworthy for several reasons: the large number of victims, the pointlessness of killing middle-aged derelicts, the savagery of their deaths. The search for the slasher gained almost daily publicity in Los Angeles. It was said to have been the biggest manhunt since the Tate-La-Bianca murders.

The case is worth examining for another reason as well. During the search, police released what they called a "psychological profile" of the killer. The profile attempted to describe what kind of man the slasher

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This peice is adapted from an article in the May issue of Psychology Today, where Mr. Campbell is an associate editor.

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was, what made him tick, what made him act the way he did. Most of us have seen such descriptions on TV cop shows. Perhaps the profile of the slasher was a bit of life imitating art.

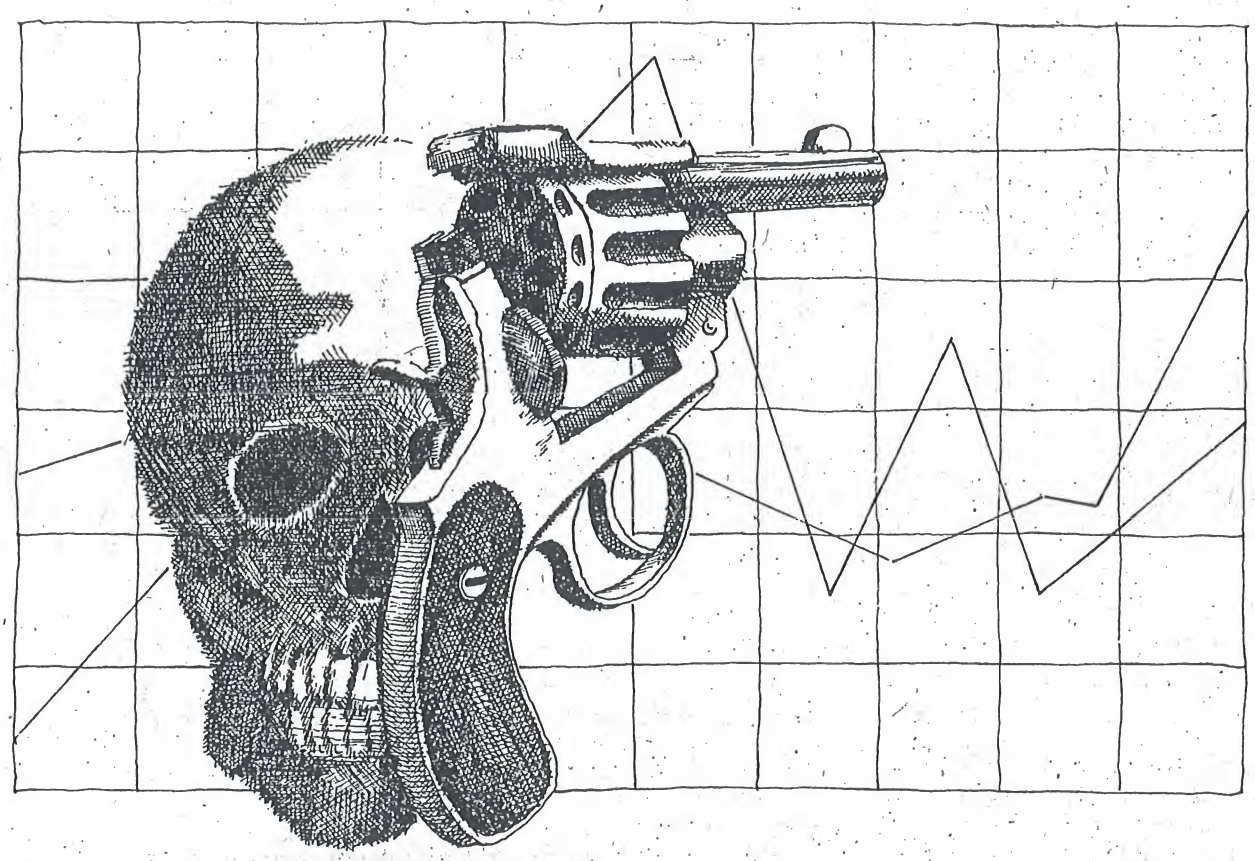
The slasher, police told TV and newspaper reporters the night of January 30 last year, was a "sexually impotent coward, venting his own feeling of worthless. . . . He strongly identifies with the derelicts and drifters he kills, and we think he's trying to resolve his own inner conflicts by turning his wrath and hatred outward. . ."

The profile went on to suggest that the killer was poorly educated, a loner, a man without friends. He might even be physically deformed. "He was driven by a frenzy to commit these murders as a substitute for normal heterosexual relations."

The police also hypothesized that the killer was suffering from "an unresolved rage" against his father, "who could have been a brutal alcoholic." The slasher was "an animal who hides in the dark and preys on weaklings and cripples." But he was "too cold and calculating" to be considered crazy.

What are we to make of this mixture of speculation and loathing?

the Value of Psychological Profiles



By Sand Toler for The Washington Post

Aside from its public relations value, the purpose of the description, which was drawn up with the help of several psychologists and psychiatrists in the Los Angeles area, seems to have been twofold: to describe the killer accurately, and, by publicizing the description, to provoke him into making a false step.

It is clear in retrospect that the profile was not useful in finding Vaughn Greenwood. Moreover, it was no more accurate a description of an unknown killer than any policeman could have supplied. It was full of vague phrases that might have referred to millions of people. And it was just as likely to have provoked the slasher into killing someone else as to have drawn him out of hiding.

It was a piece of concrete evidence, of course—a simple clue rather than any psychological opinion—that led the police to Vaughn Greenwood. Reportedly he dropped a letter with his name and address on it near the scene of another, non-fatal slashing attack.

As for the profile's accuracy, we can say at this point that the accused, Vaughn Greenwood, probably is a poorly educated loner who identifies with drifters. He is also allegedly homosexual. The profile said these things about the slasher.

Greenwood is not, however, physically deformed. Nor, presumably, could he have experienced any alcoholic brutality at the hands of his father, since according to Greenwood he never met his father. All these "psychological" details are guesses in any case. Whether reasonable or farfetched, they require no expertise of any sort.

Most of the rest of the profile is extremely vague, at least as description. "Coward," "animal," "cold and calculating," "inner conflicts," "driven by a frenzy." What do these things mean? It wasn't necessary to consult psychiatrists and psychologists to learn that the slasher was a bad person, a confused and dangerous man.

On close examination, then, the profile amounts to guesswork, generalizations, and a rather purple kind of condemnation. At best, there is something mediocre and pretentious about it. It is typical of its genre in these respects.

At worst, though, it may have been dangerous. One of the reasons for publicizing this profile was to rouse the killer to respond. Its scientific-sounding jargon, its preparation by doctors and scientists, its announcement by the symbols of armed authority, its lurid and vituperative tone—these elements might have caused an unstable person to do almost anything. It's easier to goad a person than to understand and describe him.

Unfortunately the whole idea may have backfired. According to autopsy reports, the slasher killed his youngest victim, 34-year-old Clyde C. Hay, late Thursday night, January 30, or early the next morning. The slasher was first described on the 11 o'clock news that same night, January 30, in the language we have seen.

Psychologists and psychiatrists should stay away from police work of this sort unless they can show that they know exactly what they're doing. As it is, they're just fooling around.